

FERN DALE  
(Shaw House)  
703 Main Street  
Ferndale  
Humboldt County  
California

HALS CA-31  
CA-31

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### FERN DALE (SHAW HOUSE)

HALS NO. CA-31

Location: 703 Main Street, Ferndale, Humboldt County, CA  
Lat: 40.34723 Long: -124.15695

Significance: Fern Dale or Shaw House property is significant because of its association with Seth Lewis Shaw who founded the town of Ferndale in Humboldt County. His Gothic-style Victorian Home is the oldest structure in Ferndale which was named after this property. Ferndale is significant at a dairy area in Northern California - once one of the most productive agricultural regions in California. Ferndale is one of the best preserved Victorian towns in California.

Description: (Dimensions given are approximate) Fern Dale (Shaw House) is on Main Street at Lewis in the town of Ferndale. There is a white picket fence at the sidewalk the full width of the property. The fence consists of 6" wide horizontal boards at the base up to 18" high. These boards are routed in a way to make them look like stone blocks. A top the horizontal portion of the fence are 2x2 wood pickets with four sided angled points. Every other picket is 3" shorter than the higher pickets. The entire fence is painted white. This fence appears in a drawing of the property dated 1900.

There is an opening at the center of the street frontage where the fence angles back at a 45 degree angle. Hardware suggests there use to be a gate. Either side of the opening is a 12" square timber post. The right post is topped with an elaborate rounded finale (the 1900 drawing depicts a square cap on a higher post). The left post is lacking a finial. At either side of the opening the concrete sidewalk is stamped 1902. There are similar posts on the NW side of the lot where the original driveway was. (current drive entry is at the NE side of the property and leads to a compatibly designed 3 car garage) The original drive apron is specially scored and appears to be original as it can be seen in the 1900 image.

From the entry opening a 4 foot wide concrete path leads directly towards the main gable of the front of the house. 15 feet before the house the path Ys with one half leading to the front porch and the other to the garages and another porch entry. A triangular planting bed is formed by the Y. This alignment of walk and planting bed is clearly visible in a 1900 drawing from "The History of Humboldt County Illustrated" The condition of the entry walk shows significant deterioration for a 30' section suggesting at least that portion is original and it may be original in its entirety.

The fencing on the NW and NE property lines is distinctly different from the fence at the sidewalk. It consists of 1x4 boards trimmed to create a rhythm of ups and downs. It is painted white. Further research is needed to determine if this fence matches an original.

The front garden is planted in lawn and within the lawn many round and curvilinear planting beds are cut out. Most of these beds include a specimen tree with understory ferns, perennials and shrubs. There is also a linear planting bed inside and paralleling the front fence along the sidewalk. Plantings here include: Anemone, Lavender, Dicentra, Dahlia, Amaryllis, Sword Fern, Camellia, Buddleia, Rose, and Lilac – all species appropriate to a garden of the period. The grades in the front lawn are not flat – the lawn undulates rising gently from the sidewalk to the house and from the NE side of the property to the NW.

To the left of the front gate opening is an exceptional Buckeye Tree (*Aesculus californica*) with a gnarly trunk approximately 4 feet in diameter. The tree is low branching with a well balanced canopy that extends over the sidewalk and to the middle of the closest lane of traffic. Other trees on the property that appear to be original are: Redwood, Walnut, Big Leaf Maple, Birch, Crataegus, Monterey Cypress, Holly, and one apple.

The garden has several mature, old fashioned shrubs some of which may be original. These include: old roses, a Viburnum, and a large rambling Fuchsia. There are also several trees, shrubs and perennials that are recent additions.

Other features that appear to be recent additions include a brick patio on the NW side of the house, a gazebo, a pea gravel path lined with brick, a horseshoe pit, and a stone pond and fountain. The later may have replaced a historic pond. 2 wood swings might also be replacements for similar historic swings, or not.

The property was designated as a state historic landmark on February 13, 1982, and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on September 13, 1984.

History: (Taken from “The Victorian Homes of Ferndale” by The Ferndale Museum.)  
The Shaw House is the oldest structure in the town of Ferndale. Seth Lewis Shaw a co-founder of Ferndale in 1852 began construction on the house in 1854 for his bride-to-be Isabella Armitage. They were married in 1857. The eighteen room home with its gables, balconies and bay windows was fashioned after the House of Seven Gables in Sale, Massachusetts. Construction was completed in 1866.

Shaw called his home “Fern Dale” and many huge ferns grew along the creek (Francis Creek) that ran through his property. The first Post Office was housed here with Shaw as postmaster, and the village that grew up around it took the

name Ferndale. Shaw was also the first Justice of the Peace and the bridal couple often stayed overnight at Ferndale after the marriage ceremony. One particularly nice bedroom had a fancy vaulted ceiling and was most often used for this purpose. This room came to be known as and is still called the "Bridal Suite".

The home was owned by the descendants of Shaw until 1967. It stood vacant for several years and was purchased by Frank and Jeannette Ford who made repairs and did some restoration. Later occupant, Velna Rolizzi did additional restoration, converted it to a Bed and Breakfast Inn, and prepared the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

The town of Ferndale is State Registered Landmark No. 883. Dozens of ornate homes and commercial properties line Main Street mostly built in the 1890s. Mark Williams, in his book "Northern California Off The Beaten Path" describes Ferndale as, "the best preserved Victorian town in California." Ferndale is located on the Lost Coast in an area of dairy ranches. Ferndale was once known as "cream city" and the collection of highly ornamented Victorian style homes that were built by successful dairy ranchers were known as "butterfat palaces".

Sources: "The Victorian Homes of Ferndale" by The Ferndale Museum.

Ferndale Museum historic photo collection, 515 Shaw, P.O. Box 431, Ferndale, CA 95536, Jerry Lesandro, Director, (707) 786-4466, [www.museum@ferndalemuseum.org](mailto:www.museum@ferndalemuseum.org)

"Northern California Off The Beaten Path" by Mark Williams

Historic Spots in California by Mildred Brooke Hoover, Hero Eugene Rensch, Ethel Grace Rensch, William N. Abeloe. Revised by Douglas E. Kyle, Fifth Edition, 2002, Stanford University Press.

Site visit in May 2009.

Historian: Chris Pattillo, Landscape Architect, June 14, 2009  
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Front of the 1854 Victorian Gothic Revival house showing the entry walk as it Ys forming a triangular planting bed. Mature trees and lawn at either side of the path and house (Chris Pattillo, May 27, 2009).



Front garden with detail of the fence and entry gate post (Chris Pattillo, May 27, 2009).